The Cure for Appetite

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The Cure for Appetite

by OneHandedBooks

Summary

Hannibal looks down into the glass pastry case that does not exist here and sees himself reflected, a boy of blood and hoarfrost. Starveling heart and marrow like glass. Famine in his belly like the end of the world.

My entry in Ravage- An Infernal Hannibal Anthology (2019)

Inspired by the Vestibule portion of Dante's Inferno, this story stumbles down the halls of Hannibal's beginnings and explores his fraying high society life in Baltimore in the weeks just before he meets Will.

Chapter 1

“without hope, we live on in desire” - The Inferno, Dante Alighieri (trans. John Cardi) Canto IV, 42.

“Before Dante, we spoke not of the gates of Hell, but of the mouth of Hell.”- Dr. Bedelia DeMaurier

Hannibal is hunting the harbor.

You cannot force a feast, he is fond of saying; a feast must present itself. And so Hannibal is waiting. Watching the lights of Baltimore ripple like a river of glass and listening into the wind for the voice of water.

He has a dinner party to throw, and guests to entertain, and, as it turns out, he‘s one hors d’oeuvre short. Mr. Expired Maitakes’ liver and kidneys had turned out to be a complete waste. Extensive neoplasm. Such a pity. Hannibal hadn’t even had the heart to display him. It had seemed pointless to make him into art without *making him into art*. Better to discard him respectfully. Sprawled in an alley. For those without eyes to see, a simple mugging gone wrong. It can be so perilous here, on the waterfront.

The briny breeze off the harbor brings Hannibal the smell of Barbicide and Brylcreem, raises the hair on the back of his neck. So, here is the last item on the menu presenting itself. Finally. Half an hour past his usual constitutional. Hannibal wonders briefly, uncharitably, if Mr. A Little More Off The Sides was delayed unrepentantly butchering someone else’s hairstyle.

He slides along the shadows of the pier, silent as the thin fog that’s rolling in, following the arrogant little barber on his nightly stroll around the harbor- a quick walk to clear his head after work, before heading home to his cats.

Hannibal would honestly prefer to dispatch the man in his own unbearably fashionable salon and display him *in situ*, but it is not to be. Too many tourists about this early in the evening.

Quickly corralling him into a nearby alleyway and disabling him with a cautious cocktail of propofol and ketamine will be much more prudent. Then Hannibal can safely shepherd his newly woozy friend through an unremarkable steel door at the alley’s far end and down a set of damp and rusting steps into Baltimore’s dark heart. There is a vast network of forgotten steam tunnels running beneath this city and, as it so luckily happens, right under his home.

Chapter 2

Hannibal assumes that it's the chill of the steel table beneath his bare flesh that ultimately wakes the barber.

He blinks up into the unrelenting glare of the surgical lights above him. Tugs reflexively at the straps around his arms.

"Cold," he breathes, voice hoarse and tentative.

Cold. It's a common enough first reaction. Possibly the most common, though Hannibal hasn't been keeping a complete record. *Thirsty* is also popular. More popular since he started using the ketamine. Some version of *who* or *why* is a close and pointless second. Screaming rarely comes first—not enough immediate context to warrant total heart-stopping panic, Hannibal supposes, and hope is hearty—but it always comes eventually. Unless he strikes the throat first, of course, which he doesn't intend to do this time. They're far enough underground in this steel and stone surgical suite as to make it unnecessary.

"I know," Hannibal responds, not unkindly. "We'll just be a moment."

The barber's eyes open wider, forearms and throat and belly pulled tight as he strains to see who is speaking. But Hannibal is backlit by the overheads, his face obliterated by light. A featureless, looming silhouette.

"Who are you?" the man demands, angry suddenly.

Now there's the obnoxious little weasel Hannibal met last year. He gazes dispassionately at the man's heaving chest and the trickle of sweat along his self-consciously elaborate moustaches that belie his attempt at courage. Hannibal's green-gloved hand descends from above- appearing out of the startling light, outsized and alien—and covers the man's mouth.

Hannibal touches the frosty edge of the scalpel to the barber's belly and watches eagerly for the knowledge of his own death to rise in his eyes just before he starts cutting. The frigid subterranean air thickens with the stink of fear—a bitter bracing citrus—but Hannibal is confident he can remove the organs he wants before terror-tainted blood ruins them.

"Please." This is whispered now.
"Don't do this. Why are you doing this?"

"All men are sinners," Hannibal tells the barber gently. "For all have fallen short…"

He pauses, looking down into the barber's pleading eyes, and trails off into a dispirited sigh. With a swift stroke across the throat, he puts an early end to what has been a truly unengaging bit of theatre.

He tilts the table towards the floor drain and begins to dissect the quickly cooling body. Segregating what he will use this weekend. Vacuum-sealing what he will keep for later.

Arranging what will become art, if he can bear to drag the man back to his salon. Frankly, he's not entirely sure this one is worth the effort. Still, leaving him in one of his exceptionally comfortable chairs vivisected by his own hairstyling tools is a delightful image that Hannibal just can't shake.

When he's done with the finegrain butchery, he takes an armload of sealed packages over to the industrial freezer and pops the door with his elbow, thinking idly of museums and menus. A breath of cold air envelops his body and for a moment Hannibal finds himself in a dark forest again, the straight-forward pathway lost.

In the middle of the forest is a castle and in the middle of the castle is a door and behind the door the first memories. A sob of steel and ice. Night, come red and heavy. In the empty hall beyond the door, Palestrina takes the place of screams. The walls are painted shards of glass repeating Hannibal's face endlessly and all of them are talking. Words weaving through the music. A pit of snakes with his voice.

Mischa doesn't explain me, Hannibal says. Has said. Will say.

Mischa. The taste of the soup the starving soldiers had made of her and made him eat. He wakes sometimes with the insidious grease of it coating his tongue and the memory of how he ate and ate and ate. Even after he knew what it was. Who, it was. Mischa's tiny white teeth on the crystalline ground.

When he dreams now, he dreams of food and ragged men standing in formation in the snow.

There had been four of them—until Hannibal took them apart, like they took her apart. Four of them and him—wolf boy, frozen. Driven silent. A fringe of blonde fur around a pale face and a ruby mouth.

Hannibal looks back over his shoulder into the present, into the careful ruin of the barber's body on the steel slab. Now, as then, as always, he wants to tear into it. He wants to eat in a way he no longer allows himself. He wants to cram the meat into his mouth—crackling fat and flesh and sinew. Crunch the fragile bones in his teeth.

Sometimes—now, for instance—when he is looking into the cavity of a pig from which he is shopping, as delicate and picky as a suburban housewife, he wants to dig in his fingers. Take great handfuls of offal, tearing at the heavy wet red of it, fingers like claws, and stuff it into his throat. Past breath. Past the will to stop.

The first of the four men he'd stumbled upon almost by accident when he was on holiday in Germany with his aunt and uncle. He'd snuck out of their opulent hotel that night, tracked the man to a dirty, noisy bar, and fallen on him when he'd stumbled out to take a piss in the alley. It had been utterly without finesse—a roar of borrowed knives and a hot fountain of blood spattering his face, his hands, his bare feet. Only his own hand over his own mouth had kept him from biting, biting, biting.

And then there were three.

Hannibal shoves the remains of the barber into the freezer and slams the door. Leans back against the cool steel and breathes deep. He feels his teeth with his tongue and then his fingers to make sure he is not a beast. Not a tusked beast. Not a mouth full of teeth and fury.

Chapter 3

Hannibal returns to the salon in the black hush just before dawn.

He was right, of course. As usual. The barber was hardly worth the effort. Hannibal heaves the plastic-wrapped bulk off his plastic-wrapped shoulders and into the best chair in the salon —a lovingly restored vintage piece, all wood and brass and purple tufted velvet.

How did the man get so heavy? There's hardly anything left inside him. He might be able to add two new dishes to his upcoming feast, so generous had the barber been with himself. Why should he care that the proceedings hadn't gone *exactly* as he'd planned? If he hadn't been entirely and ecstatically *transported*? Except, perhaps, for the brief intrusive memory of fear there at the end, every single aspect of it had been very nearly as intoxicating as ever.

Hannibal arranges the body in a supplicant's sprawl against the plush curved seatback—head tipped towards the heavens, arms outstretched, palms up. He smooths and straightens the barber's deliberately old-fashioned trousers, the stiff new suspenders, the bloodstained white shirt unbuttoned to the gaping navel. He drives an assortment of the barber's wickedly sharp shears through the edges of his open torso and into the wooden frame of the chair- displaying the man like an early surgical illustration. A little nod there to the traditional secondary profession of all "vintage" barbers.

Clever, Hannibal congratulates himself. He coaxes a bit of viscera into a more pleasing presentation with a slick latex hand. Steps back a moment to watch the remaining blood seep sluggishly into the chair's thick fabric. Sighs. Clever enough, anyway. It's possible there's something missing. Something that might be more… *More*. But he can't think of what it might be. He supposes he could nail the barber's arrogant tongue to the wall, but that seems like a petulant touch. A bit beneath him really. This is good enough for government work, he smirks. It's not as if the FBI, or anyone really, will notice this particular installation isn't *quite* up to his usual standard.

Satisfied, Hannibal slips out of the jaunty little salon and disappears back into the silence of the sleeping city. Heading home.

Chapter 4

The iPad chimes as Hannibal is laying the flank steak on the grill. Tattlecrime's own Ms. Freddie Lounds, paragon of poison journalism, has posted a review of his new work. Excellent.

He waits until the barber's kidneys are sautéed, until the steak is resting on the counter, until he's poured a glass of wine he doesn't entirely want, before he allows himself to settle into the armchair in the corner of the kitchen to read. He prides himself on his control.

CLIP SHOP HORROR

Crime Continues to Haunt Baltimore's Revitalized Waterfront

Brooklyn transplant, Abe Johnson, 32, was found murdered in his haute salon this morning—apparently disemboweled with a selection of his own antique shears. As Tattlecrime's exclusive photographs below clearly demonstrate, his death bears all the hallmarks of the Chesapeake Ripper's signature brutality and….

As always, Ms. Lounds is delightfully nasty. Her breathlessly morbid report is accurate enough to satisfy and far enough off the truth not to worry him. And her furtive photographs are a Technicolor dream.

Still.

Still, there's that headline. "Crime Continues to Haunt." "Crime." "Continues." As though his work could be lumped in with all the other petty violence and thievery this city was once known for. He taps a finger sharply against the edge of the tablet, clicks his tongue against his tooth.

"Haunt" is a good word though. Dense with meaning. Meaty. It carries the suggestion of "home" in its history, in its definition as a place of frequent return. But it's also commonly understood as plaguing, troubling, having a disquieting or harmful effect. As remaining persistently in the mind. Less commonly, as a feeding place for animals.

Hannibal drinks deep from the bowl of burgundy wine and plummets through a hole in the floor of his mind.

The second of the four soldiers had been harder to find, but, as it turned out, much closer than he'd imagined. Several months of research and false starts and then Hannibal had tracked him to an autumn market just blocks from his boarding school in Paris. He'd taken his aunt to the man's fruit stand one weekend, under the guise of picking up some late season berries for a pie. Hannibal had asked the man for a basket of blackberries and the man had shown not one spark of recognition.

His aunt had insisted on selecting her fruit herself, eschewing the man's middling choices. He'd been very rude to her about it and Hannibal had returned two nights later just after

closing to address this compound insult.

“What is the progenitor of all sin, Hannibal?” his aunt had asked once.

“Pride,” he’d said. Careless, dismissive. Flipping through a medieval text on battle wounds.

“No,” she’d answered, voice cool as plum wine. “It’s greed. Greed, the seed of all sin.”

Her ceremonial swords driven through the second man’s chest and the gouts of red. And then there were two.

Chapter 5

The string quartet in the corner is negotiating its way through Vivaldi's *Winter*. Again.

Hannibal's guests are a glittering still life. Arranged around the lounge like taxidermy peacocks. Hollow as hothouse roses.

He slides through the wavering crowd like a shark through kelp as the waiters glide alongside, turn and turnabout with their trays. He's as pleased as can be expected, watching his people swallow the exquisite heart tartare and miniature steak and kidney pies. Never mind that he hasn't been able to bring himself to eat more than a few bites since he finished cooking—the fine flaky pastry and rich bloody meat like a mouthful of ash.

It is both intentional and unintentional, this style of feeding. The dinners made up of extravagant oversized dishes served in polite little portions- traditional manners say it would be the height of rudeness to ask for more and so, of course, no one would dare. The cocktail parties held deliberately at supper time, with an abundance of unbearably delicious, dainty bites that are just enough to pique the appetite, over and over and over, but never sate it. His guests find themselves starving, just a little, in the face of plenty.

He takes a *vol au vent* from a nearby tray and crushes the pastry shell experimentally in his teeth. He savors the delightful rush of roast duck and juniper gravy that floods his mouth. There. Nothing at all to worry about. Whatever his minor difficulties had been with the food, they've clearly resolved themselves. His appetite is intact, his cooking above reproach.

As he dabs the corners of his mouth with a napkin, Hannibal catches Dr. Chilton's jealous eye across the room. The good doctor tips his glass to him and Hannibal tips him a friendly wink in return.

Perhaps he will kill Miriam after all, Hannibal muses as he watches Chilton agonize over whether that little gesture was an invitation to come chat or not. Kill her instead of studying her responses to his custom chemical compounds, his light therapy. Instead of carefully cultivating her, fashioning her into a tidy noose to slip around the neck of the oleaginous Dr. Chilton should any of the FBI's little trainees draw too close to him again.

Or should Chilton just grow tedious.

More tedious, Hannibal amends. He takes a glass of pale champagne from a passing waiter and moves on before Chilton decides to cross the room and bore him with some simulacrum of psychiatric insight.

He slips gracefully past lovely Alana, chatting with an old friend of his from Johns Hopkins. He smiles briefly at her and brushes her bare arm with his sleeve as he goes, releasing the subtle warm perfume of her skin. She is a rare bright spot at these affairs. A flower blooming among the weeds.

She would make a wonderful slow feast. Glazed and sugared. He shakes his head. Obviously he has no plans to kill her. That would be reckless. And he needs her in any case. She is his *sfumato*, smudging his predatory edges for those more inclined to suspicion, like her intriguing law enforcement friend. And, of course, she's charming and beautiful and it isn't at all like him to waste beauty.

This should, or may have to be, his last dinner party for a while. Sartre proposed that Hell is other people, but Hannibal thinks it might be this. Boredom, dangerous and goading, seems to be setting in despite his best efforts. Or maybe he just needs to set himself a real challenge. Something magnificent. Something suited to his skills.

He thinks of elaborate ice sculptures made of pomegranate sorbet; of whole roasted peacock, gilded in edible gold and dressed in its own iridescent feathers (plucked and replaced after roasting); of a full sized pheasant constructed entirely of paper thin slices of roasted Postmaster Who Failed to Deliver the Post; or one of those medieval subtleties the aristocracy was so fond of- like a scale model Duomo made of spun sugar and marzipan.

Although, maybe not the last one. He hardly ever allows himself to make desserts now and only if there are others to share and keep watch.

Hannibal is struck in the gut by a miserable hard cramp of pure want and his fingers tighten involuntarily around the skeletal stem of the champagne flute. In the glimmering glasses raised by his guests as they talk and laugh he sees towering spires of sugar refracted, just as they had been, in the plate glass window of the first patisserie he'd ever seen.

He remembers going in after school, mouth watering at the smell of butter and burnt sugar. Pocket full of pocket change, paralyzed by choice. The plump woman at the counter with the plump smile and an empty white box, waiting.

He looks down into the glass pastry case that does not exist here and sees himself reflected, a boy of blood and hoarfrost. Starveling heart and marrow like glass. Famine in his belly like the end of the world.

Then, or is it now, there is a phantom hand on his arm dragging him up from this poison reverie. Someone is whispering. A low Southern voice that he knows, but has never heard is calling for him to come back. come back. comeback.

"Hannibal?"

Alana at his elbow. He startles, just a little, drags his gaze back out of the past. He offers her a tipped eyebrow and a teasing tilt of the head. "Alana?"

He can smell her blush. Faint as spring roses. Pretty. And useful. He makes note of it.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course."

"It's just that you seem…"

“Handsome?” he offers. “Charming?”

Alana smiles sympathetically and nudges his arm with her shoulder. “Tired.”

He sighs and lets an exaggerated weariness come into his face, concealing a moment of freefall.

“The party is running quite late. Perhaps I’m getting old.”

Alana knocks his arm again. “You’re not old. Overly dramatic, maybe. But not old.”

Hannibal gives her a thin smile and signals a waiter for fresh champagne. They toast to drama and to not being old and Hannibal avoids his reflection in the glass.

Chapter 6

Hannibal spends the next evening swimming in his gym's enormous empty pool. Working off the extravagant lunch he'd allowed himself to have with Donald and strengthening his body against the memory of long vanished deprivation. There's no piped-in music here, for which Hannibal is grateful. Eyes closed, breathing even, he stretches into the strokes and imagines the opening bars of Ravel's *Une Barque sur L'Ocean* filling him up.

Afterwards, in the silent sauna, he runs his hands over his body, pleased not to feel the jutting rack of ribs and concave belly that have plagued his dreams of late. He lingers in the dense heat until his mind is blissfully calm again, biddable.

The steel and tile locker room that follows is a cool relief. Hannibal ratchets his polished wooden cubby open and checks his watch. Nearly nine o'clock. There should be time for a quick light supper, and then bed. He has a full day of appointments tomorrow and a rather irritating one first thing in the morning. Frankly, he's considering giving the man a referral.

He packs his swimsuit and towel. Pulls on his clothes and checks his hair in the broad mirror over the bank of chrome and marble sinks.

There is a sudden flurry of movement at the corner of his eye and Hannibal stills automatically, muscles bunching, ready for a fight. He hears water dripping, but the echo is hollow and faint as if the locker room were high ceilinged stone. It's much cooler now than it should be. His stomach aches miserably when he presses his hand to it.

Hannibal looks over his shoulder in the mirror and sees the deep cellars under his family home. He sees himself, decades younger. He and Chiyoh and the third man. Second in command. On his knees now on the cellar's granite floor.

He'd hidden his war crimes well, but not well enough.

Hannibal squeezes his eyes shut, grips the gym's marble counter, opens them again. Behind him, the past persists.

The second man begged for his life through fractured teeth. To his disgust, both then and now, there were tears streaming down his face. Hope is hearty.

"You could cry until you filled all the rivers of Hell," Hannibal told him. "And it would never be enough."

He walked forward to finish it, but Chiyoh stopped him, her hand pressed to his chest to hold him still, and demanded the man's life, firmly but politely. So Hannibal had left him for her. Out of respect.

Out of curiosity and respect.

Hannibal will not be there to see—will never go there again—but he knows how it will go. She'll feed the man on wild grouse and wild mushrooms and he'll feed himself on snails and the mossy water dripping down the stone walls. He'll live in the empty dark under the castle with only the voices of the dead for company. It is fitting.

Perhaps one day, Chiyoh will free herself. Fulfill her potential and kill him and come tell Hannibal all about it. That would be nice.

And then there was one.

Chapter 7

Jack Crawford, the big boss himself, has come to collect him at his office. There's an amusing bit of back- and-forth with his patient first and Hannibal takes that opportunity to put Jack on his back foot a little, but he is flattered.

He wonders what it is that's given him away this time. Something with the barber? Doubtful, that was immaculate. Did someone else make the same medical records connection Miriam made? Possibly, but that really had seemed like a miraculous leap and unlikely to be repeated.

He invites Jack in. Picks up the horridly sharp scalpel on his desk and gives his standard song and dance about sharpening pencils to dispel the threat. Of course he can't just dispatch *every* FBI agent who wanders into his office. No matter how exciting it might be to see Jack's shocked expression at the swing of the blade. The Expressionist red that would follow in a spray across the drawings of Paris. That would not preserve the peace, surely.

But no, as it so happens, they've not caught onto him after all. Instead, Jack is looking for a profiler.

Bedelia will disapprove, in her frosty way, but how can he resist the opportunity to watch the FBI work from the inside? In time, perhaps, to read up on his own case file? What could possibly be more fascinating than that?

It's a stupendously dangerous proposal, this flirtation with the FBI. Of course, he accepts immediately.

Chapter 8

Hannibal pours a brandy, puts Bach's sprightly cello suites on the stereo, and clicks the button that will route the music to his bedroom. He takes a single serving of leftover *sanguinaccio dolce* in its blood orange cup upstairs with him as well.

He leaves the liquor and the admittedly indulgent second dessert on the table by the fireplace so he can change and find something to wear tomorrow. He needs something perfect, something smooth and soothing.

He opens the enormous closet doors and sits on the upholstered bench inside to unlace his shoes. He strips out of the deliberately ill-fitting light blue suit and hangs it up. Puts the ivory shirt in the laundry and the matching tie back on the rack, letting the silk slither pleasantly through his hand first. He pulls on soft cotton lounge pants and a wispy cashmere sweater and goes back for the brandy. Sufficiently fortified, he begins to appraise his wardrobe.

He flicks through the hangers one-handed —sipping his drink and humming along with the music. Admiring and considering and discarding suits and slacks and shirts until he's created the very best beige camouflage.

He folds a pair of putty-colored trousers over the valet's burnished brass hanging rail and drapes a calm white shirt and unassuming khaki sport coat over the carved wooden jacket hanger. He looks through the ties briefly, decides against wearing one. He wants to dress less formally than Jack for this first consultation.

Alana had said that Jack was something of a gourmand himself and Hannibal wonders if he dares extend a dinner invitation straightaway.

He could serve *un civet de bank teller*. Hannibal had hunted the teller through the woods outside the city last week. Not because the man was particularly rude, in fact Hannibal had known almost nothing about him, but because he had been in the right place at the right time and it had amused him to do so. He'd especially enjoyed watching the man try to avoid leaving footprints in the last light snowfall of the year. In any case, he was already dressed and hanging in the cooler —blood drained and collected in a ceramic pot—just waiting to become stew. He could serve him to Jack *aux herbes* that he'd collected wild from the same forest last year and then dried. That might be fun.

Hannibal opens a shallow drawer of timepieces, selects a silver-faced watch with a plain leather band, and arranges it with happy precision in the valet's little wooden tray. He sets very moderately scuffed brown shoes beneath. Folds a thin tan sweater neatly on the nearby dresser and pats it approvingly.

The brandy is nearly gone and he pours himself another from the console bar by the fireplace. He turns the wall sconces a little lower, casting the corners of the room comfortably into shadow. It's still chilly enough for a fire, or will be once he opens these windows a little to let the cool spring air in.

When the windows are open and the fire's burning well, he relaxes back into the embrace of the over-stuffed leather armchair to the right of the fireplace. Lifts his snifter and looks into the flames through the reddish liquid. He should get a book. Or his tablet. Donald's published a new article on neuroplasticity that he's been meaning to read. But it is exquisitely comfortable here, in the fire's warm crackling heat. He takes the dessert plate from the table and digs his spoon into the thick, bloody, chocolate pudding, letting each rich spoonful melt voluptuously across his tongue.

He scrapes the spoon compulsively along the orange cup's barren bottom, uncaring that he's digging into the bitter pith, then pauses, frowning, as a strong breeze skates along his shoulders. He sets the plate aside and glances over the back of the chair towards the windows. The curtains aren't moving.

Cello Suite 2 slips and wavers, off kilter and off key, as Bach gives way to Satie's *Gymnopédies*. One of his father's records. He'd been playing it when the deserters arrived, lost in the storm and starving. Starving, like Hannibal and Mischa were starving, slowly, orphaned in the castle after the war. For a moment, the music played on alone into the shocked and sudden stillness that had followed their appearance. Then there was shouting and the shatter of glass. The rude drag of the needle across the record, decapitating the music. Hannibal had been so furious about that. So childishly furious. They hadn't yet reached his favorite movement.

There are boots reflected now in the saucy-slanted mirror over the fireplace. High-laced and heavy. A soldier's boots. It seems the chair opposite him should be occupied then, but there's no one there.

Hannibal closes his eyes. Opens them again. Still there. He may not be *entirely* sober, but he knows enough of myth and his own mind to be unsurprised by that.

There should have been three of them, Hannibal thinks idly, swirling the brandy in its big bellied snifter. Frigid sweat gathers at the nape of his neck and slides down his back like a bony finger. The three ghosts for Scrooge. The three-headed dog presiding over Hell. Three monsters for him and Mischa. But there had been four. Such lucky children they'd been.

He recognizes those boots. Mud-crusted and snowy and going at the toe. Those boots had broken his ribs when he'd fought and Mischa's hand when she'd reached for him, crying. Of course the man in the mirror is the last man. The ringleader, the commander. Who else?

He'd been the very hardest to find. He was crafty, a true predator himself, and it had taken more than a decade. Hannibal was already a doctor by the time he'd tracked this man, the last man, to a second-rate slaughterhouse in Romania.

Hannibal taps his fingers against the snifter and remembers that he'd wanted to be careful of his hands, his surgeon's hands, and that he'd forgotten that completely once he'd truly gotten underway and there was no more room to care.

The slaughterhouse had been dark. Under-staffed and barely operational. He'd been able to walk through the flanking forest and along the chain link fence and right into the yard without seeing anyone.

He'd been watching for a week and knew the man would come here, to the back of the storage shed, at the end of his shift. The last man on the last shift. A last cigarette before quitting time. Last cigarette ever, if he was successful.

Hannibal had traced the shadows along the fence and slid out of the dark at the man's shoulder. His bare feet nearly noiseless on the hardpack. The last man was cunning, though, and he jerked around just as Hannibal struck. Hannibal still managed to bury the syringe full of sedatives in the man's neck and slam down on the plunger, but it was a very near thing and he was panting and off balance by the time it was done.

He'd hauled the unconscious man back into the slaughterhouse and down to the killing floor, boot heels bouncing off the iron steps. He'd laid the man out on the ground, forced his wrists into the chain shackle meant for a pig's hind legs and strung him up upright. Toes barely touching the floor, scrabbling unconsciously at the red-stained concrete.

The pigs had gone wild, terrified of the beasts in their midst. The squealing and clattering of their hooves deafening in the deathhouse.

Hannibal circled the room collecting the likeliest-looking meat processing tools to supplement the knives he'd carried with him. He draped a dirty blanket on the floor to hold them all. When he was finished, he dragged a tall unbalanced stool into the middle of the room and sat waiting, rocking the uneven legs side to side. He wished he'd brought along a portable record player. He'd really like to listen to that last Satie movement right now.

"Cold," the last man said when he finally came to, blinking and confused.

Hannibal slid off the stool and moved closer. "Do you remember me?"

The man stared then shook his head vehemently. Hannibal nodded agreeably then darted forward, standing tiptoe and shrieking "Mischa!" into the man's face in an anguished howl. Face drawn in agony, hands reaching, tearing at his own clothes.

Then he stepped back. Entirely calm. "And now?"

The man paused for a fraction of a second then shook his head again, but it was too late. Hannibal had seen the truth in him.

He looked over all the tools he'd assembled to disassemble this man —pliers and pig sticker and bone saw. He could make him talk first —admit everything he'd done, apologize. Say anything Hannibal wanted probably. If medicine had taught him anything, it was that flesh was fragile and pain would eventually bend any body to one's will. He could make the man carve Mischa's name over and over into his own skin, if he wanted to.

Hannibal remembers the violent indecision, the careful design falling apart, the unplanned lunge at the man's throat.

Once he'd torn into him with his teeth, once he'd done that- bitten down and swallowed- there was nothing to stop him. He devoured as much raw as he could stomach before falling back breathless against the floor. Crimson to the waist and exhausted.

There'd been little left of the man at the end. Certainly nothing that would be identifiable once Hannibal had mixed the remains in with the rest of the slaughterhouse waste. He was nothing, and unlike everything he'd taken from Hannibal, he would not be missed.

And then there were none.

That should have been enough, really. Would have been, in a perfect world. Revenge completed and the memory of his sister put to rest. But it wasn't. His aunt had been right; Mischa didn't explain him. He had been born a blade. Her death was just the whetstone.

Hannibal reaches for his brandy and tosses it back, his hands casting black and spindly shadows on the wall in the low flickering firelight. The mirror above the fireplace is empty. He tamps down the ravening demands of his belly, tosses the shell of the orange into the flames, and goes to bed.

Chapter 9

The next morning, the guards wave Hannibal through the gates into Quantico —the first step towards the man who will destroy him. Remake and rearrange him. A quick and painless step, all things considered, across the threshold and onto the long road down. Hannibal feels a strange sense of relief as he enters, its origin unknown.

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He gives a magnificent performance, if he does say so himself, of context-appropriate disgust and genuine concern as he reviews Jack's wall of murdered girls.

As he peruses the photos and forensic reports, Hannibal sees antlers piercing flesh and a blur of wood beams outlining what's probably a cabin intercut with images of his own bloody mouth, teeth sunk deep into the last man's thigh. Raw meat, then venison that isn't venison. Steak and kidney pie, followed by a rustic American stew and all the uses for human bone. A faceless killer, who he imagines must be a very big man to have done all this work this fast and alone, blurs into Hannibal himself standing alone in the slaughterhouse, dripping blades in hand. Over-stuffed stomach roiling with revulsion and yet somehow still hungry.

He shoves the images back, impatient and annoyed, and examines another missing persons photo on the board. He really shouldn't have given those memories any quarter last night. Although to be fair, it's entirely possible they would have been flushed out by this case study anyway. He and this killer are blood kin after all, though their motives are different.

It's clear he loves these women- there's the wholesale Communion, the remorse for the one he couldn't consume. Hannibal knows an Act of Contrition when he sees one.

There is a tempting design taking shape behind his eyes, a shadowcast of this killer's work. A bright and shiny new inspiration and he is savagely glad of it. In addition to being beautiful, it might also be helpful to the investigation, for Jack to see something like that. Or it would be if he had eyes to see it. But he doesn't. It wouldn't be appreciated. Hannibal sighs to himself, stifles the pointless disappointment.

In any case, he knows that Jack doesn't want him to profile a killer. Or not this killer. Not really. He wants his expertise on something else.

It doesn't take long, the space of one resentful introduction offered through gritted teeth, to understand what it is Jack's really after here.

Hannibal sits across from Jack's newest sacrificial protégé, pokes and prods him until he spits venom and his cheeks flame with shame and fury. Hannibal goes molten along the seams, so full of heat he fancies himself glowing at the eyes like a furnace.

Here is something new and wonderful, after all this time. Something sharpened and rare and lovely with a cutting insight to rival his own.

Will like water in the desert.

Will, the cure for appetite.

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